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Shifting time: Temporality in Schubert’s (re)transition

It is well known that, in his late instrumental music, Schubert paid homage to Beethoven, specifically the so-called “heroic” Beethoven. The end results Schubert produced, however, were quite different from those of his idol; most significantly, Schubert began to adopt what he proclaimed a ‘new way towards a grand symphony’ in constructing large-scale musical time, leading to a non-linear, non-teleological musical temporality distinct from his Classical model. What has long been regarded as a deficiency in his understanding of large-scale forms is rather the product of unique formal procedures—off-tonic returns, numerous repetitions, harmonically closed themes, modal mixture, and the use of extremely expanded diatonic relations—through which Schubert creates temporal layers distinguished by the fissures between them and their expansion of musical time.

This paper examines the nature of musical time in selected excerpts from Schubert’s late instrumental music, by investigating his handling of musical form. The formal procedure in these works seems to be based upon the idea of fragmentary, layered and disconnected temporality. Approaching this construction with awareness of the new temporal flow allows for analytical participation in the dialogue between sections comprising the formal structure. Through this perspective, I will argue that Schubert’s conception of musical time plays a key role in rendering a new, distinctly Romantic concept of musical narrative.